



State Representative

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3rd District

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Transportation

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Legislative Report to the 3rd District

Spring 2002

Dear Friends,

When state lawmakers gathered in Olympia in early January, we knew we had our work cut out for us. The transportation crisis that had been worsening for years was still with us. The state's economy had been trending downward since last summer, but after September 11 the economy's gentle glide nosed over into a tailspin that created a \$1.5 billion deficit in the state's biennial operating budget.

Health care costs, school enrollments, and prison populations were up. Employment and state tax revenues were down. All in all we had the makings of a disaster. And just to make things even more complicated, a pair of special elections last fall had given Democrats our first House majority in eight years; many Republicans in the House, including their leaders, seemed relieved to turn over the tiller as we headed into the storm.

Well, we're not out of the storm yet. But in a short, 60-day session, we surprised a lot of people. We managed to craft and pass a balanced budget that included no general tax increases. We kept cuts in basic services to a minimum, passed a number of laws making government more efficient, managed to grant a modest funding boost to our public schools, and we did something that was long overdue: We passed a multi-billion-dollar transportation plan that you'll be able to vote on next November. Again, we did this in 60 days, adjourning without a special session for the first time in years.

As I said, we're not home free. We know that, barring a miracle, next session we'll be facing additional budget deficits and more service cuts, with even more ingenuity required to get by on a finite amount of revenue. I welcome your ideas at this critical time in our history. But I'm confident, and I hope you are as well, that the best is just around the corner.

Sincerely,

Alex

Please stay in touch

I want to thank the many people in the 3rd district who have phoned, e-mailed and written me with questions, suggestions and even criticisms. Often, people a long way from Olympia have a better perspective on some things than those of us who are in the middle of the arena day-in and day-out. So thanks again, and I hope you'll stay in touch in the coming months. Because of election-year rules that govern all members of the House, this newsletter will be my last this year – but I can still respond to anyone who contacts me about legislative business, and I hope you will.

State Representative Alex Wood

Transportation

The biggest news to come out of Olympia this year is the fact that we finally broke the tie between Democrats and Republicans that had held so many crucial issues hostage for the last three years in the House. The strongest evidence of that is the transportation plan that will go before the public for an up-or-down vote in November. Many of us felt we should have taken the vote ourselves, but I know for a fact there weren't enough yes votes to pass it. So we've sent you a \$7.6 billion proposal that will, if it passes, go a long way toward clearing up some of the congestion that is choking our state. Certainly, much of that congestion affects the I-5 corridor over on the west side of the mountains, but it's a mistake to think that the crisis, and the proposed solution, somehow don't affect us here in Spokane. Among other things we managed to get into the plan are:

- More than \$200 million to construct phase one of the North Spokane Corridor from Wandemere to Hawthorne; and

- \$35 million to widen I-90 by two lanes from Argonne to Sullivan.

And even though this one's outside the Spokane area, I think it's important to mention that this proposal would also improve SR-270 from Pullman to the Idaho border by adding two lanes and a center median to this deadly stretch of pavement.

As for the revenue sources in the plan, here are the broad elements of the transportation proposal you'll be voting for or against:

- A nine-cent-per-gallon gas-tax increase, with a nickel kicking in on January 1, 2003, and the other four cents added in a year later – which works out to \$54 a year for a driver who logs 12,000 miles a year at 20 miles per gallon;
- A one-percent sales tax on new and used motor vehicles – that's a one-time expense of \$150 on a \$15,000 car or truck, or about \$3.15 a month if you take out a four-year loan; and



- A 30-percent increase in truck-weight fees.

Are these real taxes? You bet. They have to be if we're going to put nearly \$8 billion into transportation over the next decade. Are they worth it? That's something that every voter will have to decide for him- or herself before they cast their vote in November. It's everyone's job now to become familiar with the details, weigh the pros and cons, and vote accordingly – and whichever way it goes, it's a vote that we'll all be living with for a long time. If I can be of assistance in helping you learn more about the referendum, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Balancing the budget — without a general tax increase

Conventional wisdom said we wouldn't be able to balance the budget this year without massive tax hikes. But the problem with conventional wisdom is that it's conventional. We managed to get out of Olympia on time and with a balanced budget – *without* raising your sales or property taxes. Instead, we made tough cuts and kept a lid on spending better than any other Legislature in 40 years.

Are there parts of the budget that I have problems with? Yes, without question. Anytime we have to carve real substance out of programs that serve kids, the elderly, developmentally disabled and other vulnerable people, my alarm goes off. For now, though, we need to take some satisfaction from the fact that we kept cuts in basic services to a minimum – and again, did so without the tax increases that so many pundits predicted. We scored a distinct victory on one particular issue that is important to me, and to many others here in the 3rd district: State appropriations for nursing homes escaped the budget knife.



Legislative Report to the 3rd District

Education

I don't want to sound like a broken record – remember records? – but this year my realistic goal in terms of education was to shield it from serious cuts. That desire, which was shared by many others, was a driving force in the decision to tap into the tobacco-settlement dollars. I hope we won't have to do that again in the future, but the plain fact is, it kept us from having to do real damage to education this year. We were able to honor both education initiatives that passed last year, approving raises for teachers and other school employees, and channeling additional funds into class-size reduction efforts. The bottom line is that education spending will be modestly up this year – about 2.3 percent over last year – and per-pupil spending will increase by about \$300.

Another victory for schools this year is the passage, after five years of struggle, of the Safe Schools bill,



which many of you may know as “the bully bill.” This bill simply acknowledges the obvious, which is that our children shouldn't have to put up at school with the kind of bullying, intimidation and harassment that none of us, as adults, would stand for in our offices or factories or stores. We know that bullying is one of the primary factors in most of the school shootings that have plagued America in the last decade. We know that bullying makes school a nightmare for countless students. And now every school district in the state is directed to institute an anti-bullying policy before the beginning of the 2003-04 school year.

Day-care center benefits from capital budget

Perhaps the least-publicized budget produced by the Legislature is the capital, or construction, budget. It is separate from the general fund, or operating budget, and the transportation budget, and is generally smaller than both of them. I'm happy to say that this year the capital budget includes a \$500,000 grant for the West Central Community Center's child-care project here in Spokane.

In addition to the child-care center, other Spokane projects funded in the capital budget include the Blair Elementary School project (\$4.6 million), the design phase of the new Washington State Patrol Spokane crime lab (\$235,000) and repairing and upgrading the Science Building at Spokane Community College (\$285,000).



Reforming the civil service and unemployment insurance systems

This was quite a session in the Commerce & Labor Committee, where I serve as vice chairman. We enacted landmark civil service reform legislation early on, and followed that up by restructuring the unemployment insurance tax schedule to provide long-overdue equity for industries that had historically been paying more than their fair share into the system. Employers are expected to save nearly \$160 million over the next three years, and at the same time, training benefits for displaced workers are updated and strengthened.

The civil service reform is your proverbial three-legged stool. The bill updates archaic rules and regulations that have long worked against efficiency and merit-based advancement; grants state workers the same collective-bargaining rights that their colleagues at the county and city level have enjoyed for many years; and increases the practice of contracting out state jobs to private industry.

Legislative Report to the 3rd District

Helping the charities that help others

As government's ability to provide social services is squeezed by the economy and by the influence of a very vocal anti-tax/anti-government segment of society, charitable organizations are being asked to take on a larger and larger role as part of the "safety net." Because many of these charities generate a portion of their revenue by staging bingo games, I successfully sponsored a bill this year that has the potential to increase their ability to fund social services, and at the same time cut some of their overhead on bingo facilities. HB 2918 removes the three-bingo-days-per-week restriction that has existed up to now, and it also allows two charitable organizations to share one bingo facility, conducting their games on separate nights. Because of the limit on how many days a week charities could offer bingo, and because different organizations were prohibited from

sharing one bingo hall, these large buildings were forced to sit empty four nights every week, draining revenue that could be much better spent on a given charity's primary mission.

Another bill I introduced this year will make it easier for charities, churches and individuals to prepare and provide meals to homeless people throughout our state. For 15 years, Estelle Bailey stood in her kitchen and lovingly cooked hot casseroles that she would then give away to homeless teens in Spokane. Unfortunately, her largess was brought to a halt when health authorities discovered a well-meaning wrinkle in state law that made it illegal to serve to the public



Sometimes a good, hot meal can make all the difference in the world. That's why I was so relieved when Governor Locke signed my bill facilitating food donations for poor and homeless persons

meals that weren't prepared in a restaurant-grade kitchen by licensed food preparers. Well, no more. I'm happy to report that in late March, Governor Locke signed my HB 2325, which injects common sense into the equation, allowing good-hearted women and men like Bailey to give prepared food to charities for distribution to homeless and other needy people, without having to equip their homes with expensive, restaurant-grade kitchens.

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